

## PLATO AND EGYPT The Egyptian Tradition

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In Hellenistic and Roman times, Greek biographies of philosophers and politicians elevated to the rank of sages used it as a cliché that their subjects were disciples of Egyptian priests or Eastern wise men. We find in these works that Egypt was a source of intellectual inspiration for Greeks from the Ionian philosophers to Plato and also later.<sup>1</sup> In several cases these are, of course, mere legends or attempts to strengthen the authority of the Master in question by crediting him with studies in the East, though in some other cases these claims are obviously true.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, Thales was said to be the first to measure the height of the greatest pyramid.<sup>3</sup> Solon heard, according to Plato in *Timaeus*<sup>4</sup> the story of Atlantis from an Egyptian priest in Sais, the political and cultural center of Egypt of the XXVth Dynasty. In these cases it is possible that these visits of Egypt really took place. On the other hand, it is highly improbable that Democritus ever saw the Nile.<sup>5</sup>

The life of Pythagoras, who was regarded as a philosopher rather than a mathematician in ancient times, is obscured by legends. According to one tradition, he studied in Phoenicia first, then realizing that the lore of the Phoenicians was of Egyptian origin he went to Egypt. He visited the priests of Heliopolis, Memphis and Thebes and he was even said to have mastered the Egyptian language.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The work of *Th. Hopfner*, *Orient und griechische Philosophie* (Beihefte zum *Alten Orient* H. 4), Leipzig 1925 is still very useful as a source of information. *Hopfner* in most cases doubts that the visits of Greek philosophers in the East can be taken as historical facts.

<sup>2</sup>The question is still a matter of debate; cf. the following selection from the mass of literature *K. Swoboda*, *Platon et l'Égypte*, *Archiv Orientalni* XX. (1952), 28-38; *V.M. Davis*, *Platon on Egyptian Art*, *JEA* 65 (1979), 121-127; *B. Mathieu*, *Le voyage de Platon en Égypte*, *ASAE* LXXI (1987), 153-167; *S. Morenz*, *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten*, Zürich 1969, 44-46; *Fr. Zucker*, *Athen und Ägypten bis auf den Beginn der hellenistischen Zeit*, in: *Aus Antike und Orient*, Leipzig 1950, 157-160; *U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf*, *Platon I*, Berlin 1920, 242 ff.; *J. Kerscheneiter*, *Platon und der Orient*, Stuttgart 1945, 44-55; *R. Godel*, *Platon à Héliopolis d'Égypte*, Paris 1956 (postscript by *Fr. Daumas*). The question was treated by *Fr. Daumas* several times, e.g. *L'origine égyptienne de la tripartition de l'âme chez Platon*, in: *Mélanges A. Gutbub*, Montpellier 1984, 41-54; Cf. also *PW* 40. Halbband 1950, 2343 ff. (*H. Leisegang*).

<sup>3</sup>*Plinius*, *HN*. XXXVI. 12; *Plutarch*, *Sept. sap. conv.* 2 (146-7). *Hopfner*, *Fontes* 200. 219.

<sup>4</sup>21 E ff. Cf. *Critias* 108 D ff.

<sup>5</sup>*Diogenes Laertius* IX.35 refers to a literary tradition (Demetrius., Antisthenes) about his visit to Egypt.

<sup>6</sup>*Diogenes Laertius*, VIII.3 (Pythagoras).

During his stay in Egypt which lasted for twenty-two years, he managed to absorb the full wisdom of the Egyptians. According to posterity it was here in Egypt that he acquired the idea of metempsychosis and the doctrine of mystical character of the numbers.<sup>7</sup> Here, however, it must be pointed out the metempsychosis was not part of the higher theology of Egypt; it was more at home in popular belief and narrative literature.<sup>8</sup> In his biographies, although of Roman date, there is some evidence that Pythagoras did know Egyptian religion. (Though whether he actually visited Egypt is something even this piece of evidence cannot help us to decide.) In Iamblichus's biography of Pythagoras an ancient element of Egyptian magic appears: the belief that birds can be brought down to earth by the power of magic charms.<sup>9</sup>

In Plato's dialogues Egypt is frequently discussed.<sup>10</sup> While each of these mentions can be explained by saying that he found his information in his readings or acquired his knowledge of Egypt from hearsay, it is highly probable that during his travels he visited Egypt. In the *Lives Of Philosophers* Diogenes Laertius<sup>11</sup> reproduced a few lines from Hermodorus, Plato's disciple, whose information on this matter would be rather hard to contest. Hermodorus mentions Plato's travels to Megara, Kyrene, Italy and Egypt.

The similarities between Plato's idea of an other world and Egyptian beliefs in the same were noted as early as in the Antiquity. The belief that true knowledge can come to man only after death can be attested first in Egypt<sup>12</sup> and the symbolism of the swan<sup>13</sup> is another common feature (see the swan statues placed in Egyptian royal tombs).<sup>14</sup>

In two of his works<sup>15</sup> Thoth the Egyptian god of wisdom appears under the name of Theuth.

I do not intend to go into the analysis of Plato's dialogues of which I referred only to a few. It will suffice to state here that to Plato, who lived in the confusion of the life of the Greek polis, Egyptian civilization represented an ideal model with its apparent immobility, its traditionalism and internal stability.<sup>16</sup>

Still, Plato's respect for Egypt never degenerated into uncritical adulation. He noted that even in Egypt there were fallible and badly functioning institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Plato became later one of the frequently studied authors in Graeco-Roman Egypt.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Diodorus I. 98; Philostratus, *Vita Apoll.* III.19, etc.

<sup>8</sup>E.g. Pap. D'Orbiney, Setna Roman. Cf. Herodotus II. 123, LÄ V, 813 (H. Brunner).

<sup>9</sup>Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* XIII, 62 (ed. M. von Albrecht), L. Kákósy, *Egyptian Magic in the Legend of Pythagoras*. *Oikumene* 4 (1983), 187-189.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. literature in note 2.

<sup>11</sup>III. 6 (Plato) Cf. Fr. Daumas in: R. Godel, *Platon à Héliopolis d'Égypte*, Paris 1956, 76-77.

<sup>12</sup>L. Kákósy, Imhotep and Amenhotep, Son of Hapu as patrons of the Dead, *Studia Aegyptiaca* VII (1981), 180-182. Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 66 A-67 C.

<sup>13</sup>*Phaedo* 84 E-85 A. (The last song of the swan before his death.) Cf. Horapollo, *Hieroglyphica* II.39.

<sup>14</sup>LÄ V. 755-757, (s.v. Schwan, B. van de Walle); J. Vandier d'Abbadie, *Le cygne dans l'Égypte ancienne*, RdÉ 25 (1973) 35 ff. Although also identified as geese, the birds in the royal tombs were undoubtedly swans. This is clearly shown by their long neck.

<sup>15</sup>*Philebus* 18 B-C; *Phaedrus* 274 C-275 B. As Thoth was identified with Hermes, Plato appears in late tradition as disciple of Hermes. G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, Cambridge 1986, 200.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Laws II. 656 D-E on the conservatism of art.

<sup>17</sup>Laws II. 657 A.

<sup>18</sup>This is shown by the numerous papyrus fragments of his works. Cf. e.g. Pap. Oxyrhynchus vol. 52 no. 3666-3682.



When during the reign of Augustus Strabo visited Heliopolis in Egypt, the guides claimed they knew where Plato and Eudoxus had had their lodgings.<sup>19</sup> They also said that the two of them had spent thirteen years in the company of the priests of Heliopolis who were rather reticent to speak to them first. Thus, Egyptians maintained Plato lived and studied in their country. The same is claimed in a Greek papyrus from the Roman Period,<sup>20</sup> where Plato is in conversation with Peteesis the prophet (that is a priest of high rank) and listens to the priest's exposition of the doctrines of astrology. Though this late papyrus does not settle the question of Plato's visit either, it is another argument in support of the view that the visit did take place.

We have another body of texts which may have originated in the stories of the Egyptian guides and in some cases in the erudition of the visitors. These are the Greek graffitos from the tomb of Ramesses VI from the Valley of the Kings in Thebes. In these inscriptions visitors of the Roman Imperial Period expressed their admiration for the imposing spectacle presented by this huge monument. In some of these texts<sup>21</sup> the visitors refer to Plato as their great predecessor in paying visit to this place. One of the visitors Nikagoras in the time of Constantine was a *dadoukhos* of the Eleusian mysteries.<sup>22</sup> All this evidence points to the fact that besides the Greek and Roman authors a deep-rooted Egyptian tradition speaks in favour of Plato's visit to Egypt.

The question arises, was it worth the trouble to Greek philosophers to travel to Egypt to make studies there? The answer must be a positive one. In the period from the 7th to the 4th cent. the culture of Egypt was far from being an entity of rigidification and intellectual paralysis. That the spirit of geographical exploration was very much alive is shown by the circumnavigating of Africa the Phoenicians carried out at the behest of Pharaoh Neko, and we also know about attempts to explore the western desert.<sup>23</sup> The doctors of Egypt had an international reputation and a recently published papyrus in the Brooklyn Museum that contains a treatise on snakes is evidence that Egyptians were interested in scientific classification.<sup>24</sup> Added to this, there was a strong interest in the archaic, and as it made Egyptians to study ancient texts, it contributed to the development of philological methods. Therefore the country of the Nile was rightly regarded as a center of knowledge though Greek science was soon to supersede Egypt.

The high opinion the people of Graeco-Roman Egypt had of Plato is expressed by a group of statues (Pindarus, Hesiod, Homer, Protagoras, Thales, Plato) in the

<sup>19</sup>Geogr. XVII. 29 (806).

<sup>20</sup>Catalogue of the Greek Papyri in the John Rylands Library Manchester II (ed. by J. de M. Johnson, V. Martin, A.S. Hunt), London, Manchester 1915, 2-3, no. 63 (3rd cent A.D.).

<sup>21</sup>J. Baillet, Inscriptions grecques et latines des tombeaux des rois ou syringes à Thèbes (MIFAO 42 deuxième fasc.) Le Caire 1923, no. 1255, 1263, 1265, 1266, 1279. Cf. A. Bataille, Les Memnonia, Le Caire 1952, 172-173.

<sup>22</sup>Baillet, no. 1265.

<sup>23</sup>For Egyptian science in the Saite Age and the following centuries cf. L. Kákossy, Les sciences à l'époque saïte et persane, Annales Universitatis Scientiarum Budapestinensis de Rolando Eötvös Nominatae Sectio Classica III (1975), 17-22.

<sup>24</sup>S. Sauneron, Un traité égyptien d'ophiologie, Le Caire 1989.

necropolis of Memphis (Saqqâra) in a hemicycle which forms the foreground of the Sarapieion.<sup>25</sup>

I offer this short note to the great scholar who devoted an important part of his activity to the study of interrelations between different civilizations.

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<sup>25</sup>*J. Ph. Lauer-Ch. Picard*, *Les statues ptolémaïques du Sarapieion de Memphis*, Paris 1955, 144-147, fig. 83-84.